

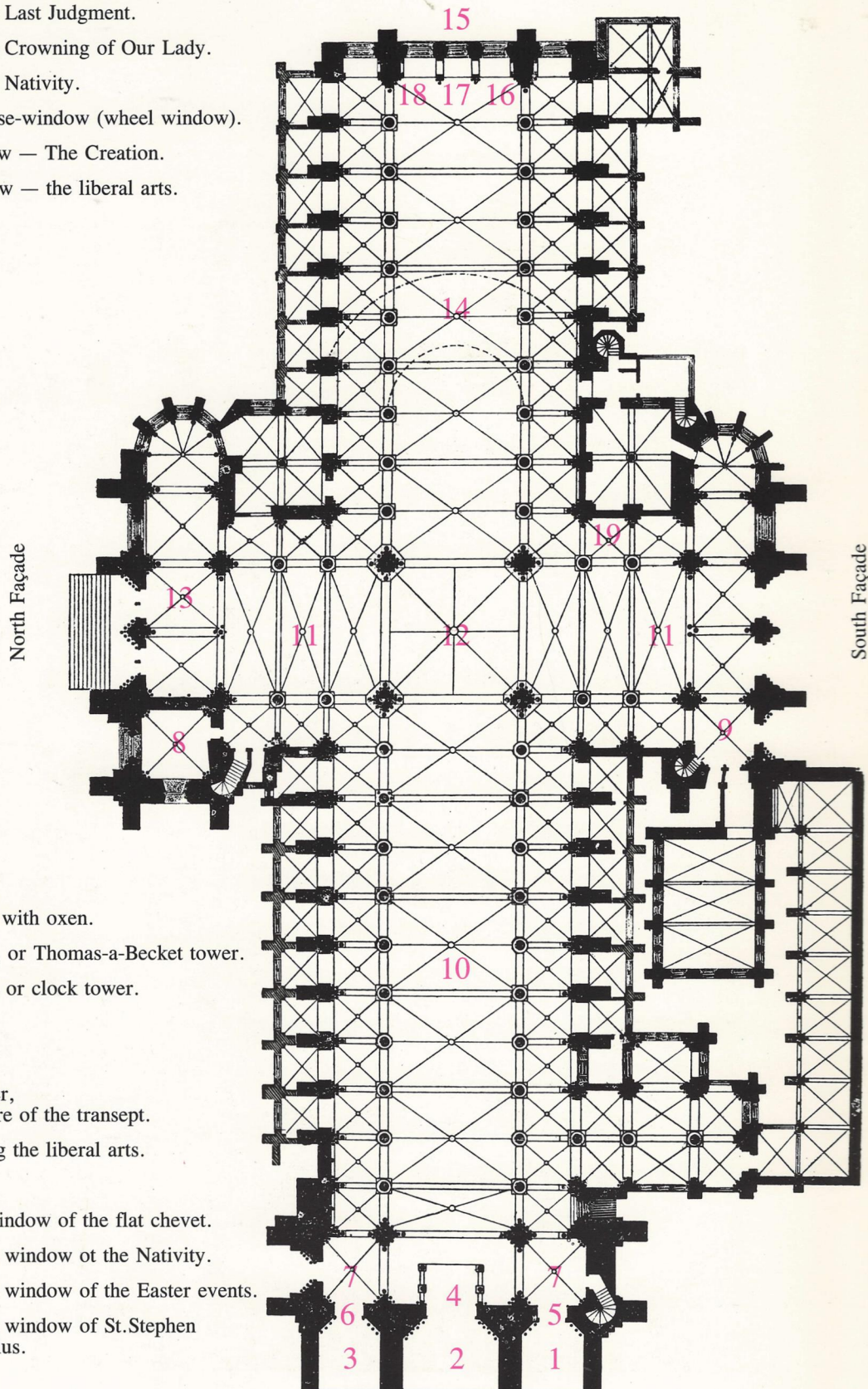
# LAON CATHEDRAL

by SUZANNE MARTINET



East Façade  
THE FLAT CHEVET

- 1 : Portal of the Last Judgment.
- 2 : Portal of the Crowning of Our Lady.
- 3 : Portal of the Nativity.
- 4 : The West rose-window (wheel window).
- 5 : South window — The Creation.
- 6 : North window — the liberal arts.



- 7 : West towers with oxen.
- 8 : North tower, or Thomas-a-Becket tower.
- 9 : South tower, or clock tower.
- 10 : Nave.
- 11 : Transept.
- 12 : Lantern tower,  
central feature of the transept.
- 13 : Rose showing the liberal arts.
- 14 : Chancel.
- 15 : Great rose-window of the flat chevet.
- 16 : Stained glass window of the Nativity.
- 17 : Stained glass window of the Easter events.
- 18 : Stained glass window of St. Stephen  
and Theophilus.
- 19 : Fonts.

West Façade  
THE PARVIS



# LAON CATHEDRAL



SUZANNE MARTINET



# THE CATHEDRAL'S HISTORY

Laon, known as «The Crowned Mountain», has been watched over for centuries by this magnificent cathedral with five towers (four of which are open-worked), visible for miles around.

It was on an ancient druidical site, within a fortified camp set up between 357 and 361 by Macrobus (praetor to Julian the Apostate) after his victory over the Alemans, that a small church (50 m.) was built at the beginning of the fifth century by General Count Emile. This church was dedicated to Our Lady, like the one erected at Reims by St.Nicaise. It was here that the youngest son of Emile was brought up, the famous St.Remy, who was later to baptise Clovis and turn Laon into a bishopric.

At the accession of the Carolingians, Pippin the Short One married Bertha, the daughter of Colbert, count of Laon and Laon started to gain considerable importance. At

the same time as the St.Riquier abbey church was being built and also the famous chapel at Aix, Charlemagne, still King, was present at the dedication of Laon's new St.Saviour's — St.Mary's cathedral on the 6th.September 800. Alcuin, adviser to Charles, was later to write a poem in which he describes its splendours. The church had solid masses of frontage with towers set above. King Louis 4th. of Overseas was to be crowned here.

Under the Capetians, bishop Elinand rebuilt a Romanesque church with visible carpentry, which was to be the setting for the coronation of Philip 1st. in 1066 when he came of age. Gutted by fire during the parish uprising of 1112, the building was renovated by Blessed Bartholomew of Jur with money from fund raising carried out along the Loire and in the South of England. In 1155 the new bishop, master of Laon College, started the five-sided chancel

and the great transept so as to receive the numerous pilgrims. The nave was finished in 1205. However, serious problems in the curved part of the chancel (built without a flying buttress) caused this chancel to be transformed into a flat chevet. Around 1240 the five towers were completed, as well as two large belfries on the terraces of the transept façade. A mere 80 years was all that was needed to complete this admirable work.

The South transept façade was altered at the beginning of the 14th. century ; the chapels of the nave and chancel were closed off by Renaissance screens. But time was to take its toll...as much as by the iconoclastic canons of the 17th. and 18th. centuries as by the ravages of the Revolution.

In the second half of the 19th. Century, the cathedral was restored by the architect Bœswillwald, who saved it from total ruin.

*West façade.*





An old engraving of the cathedral.

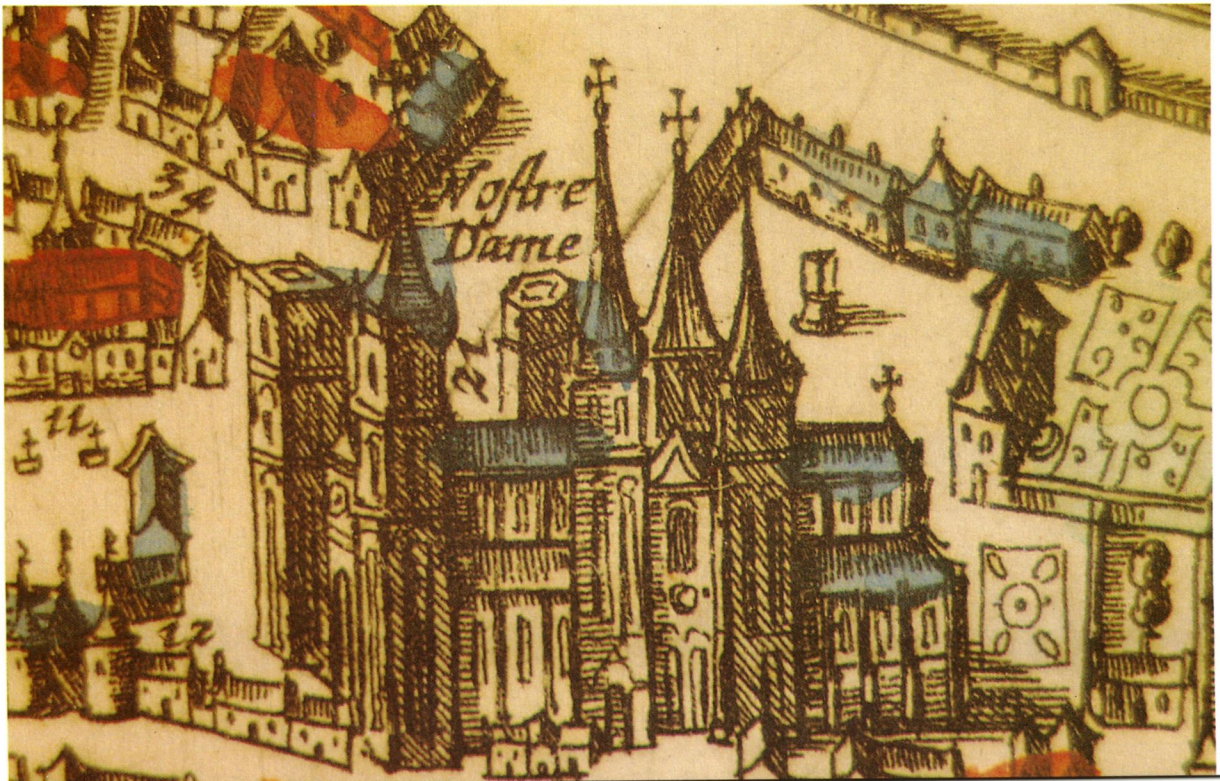
*The cathedral seen in its surroundings at the beginning of the 18th. century, taken from a large map of the town, drawn up by the Dutch geographer Jansonius.*

*The great basilica with its parvis and the little St. Martin's church to the left; to the right, the bishop's courtyards and garden. The artist has expertly portrayed the jungle of towers and bell-towers as was to be seen before their destruction in the latter half of the 18th. century.*

*On the West façade only the right hand tower was topped by a spire. On level with the transept, the North Thomas-a-Becket tower had no campanile, but there were three belfries: on the South clock tower and on the two transept terraces.*



*West rose (wheel window)*





*The West towers as seen from the transept.*





## THE WEST FAÇADE

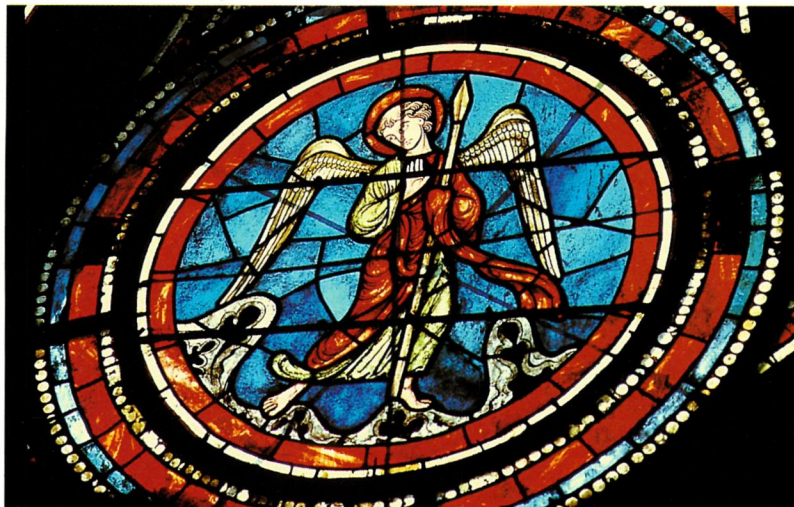
The West façade has often been compared to the Anglo-Norman façades which, as here, are divided up into portals on the ground level, windows and rose window on the first storey and a gallery cutting across the façade on the second storey, thus echoing externally the interior divisions of the nave. However, any further comparison stops there, for the Laon façade is not just a decorative wall shutting off the nave. Here we have a powerful mass of rectangular frontage extending in width beyond the body of the nave and abutting solidly against it. This most definitely makes us think of the carolingian style with solid masses of storeyed façades.

At ground level projecting porches shelter the portals. Before the Revolution the pilasters of these porches were open, allowing free movement between the portals. In order to consolidate the façade which had subsided by about 80 cms. at the height of the rose window, Bœswillwald shut off these passages during the renovations. However this rather special lay-out of the porches had already set the fashion for the North and South porches of the Chartres cathedral.

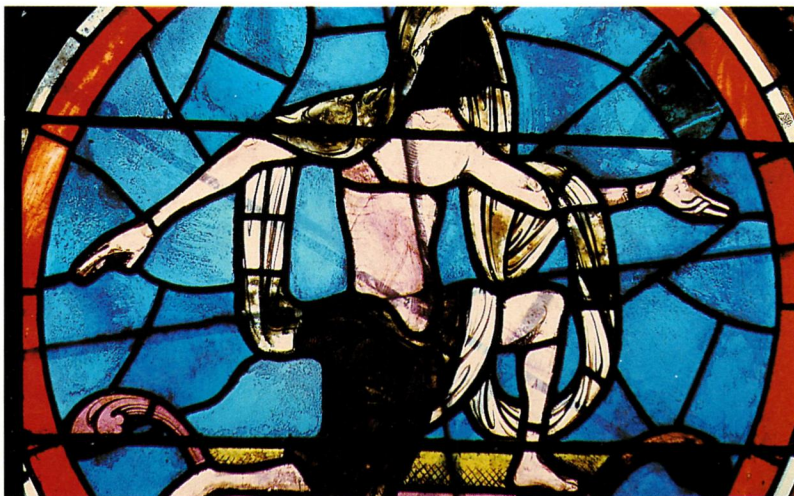
On the first storey between two deeply arched windows is a wheel-window : radiating in and from the central oculus, 12 tiny columns are set out like the spokes of a wheel. This lay-out is to be seen elsewhere in churches around Laon, notably at St. John the Baptist's at Vaux, at Mons, Vorges and Braine.

These rose-windows are rather special in that not one of the spokes corresponds to the vertical or horizontal axes of the circle ; they are always set out in a « V » formation.

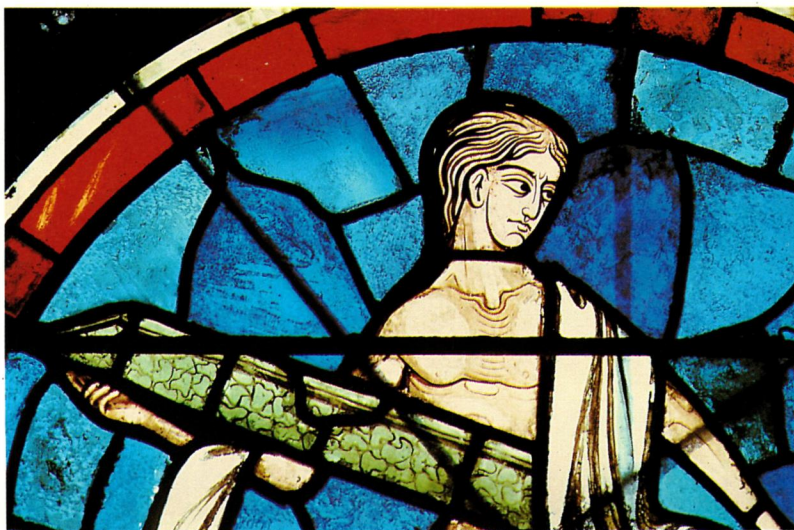
Above runs an open gallery which is divided into three parts—the central one being higher than the two lateral ones. Above this we have a statue of the Blessed Virgin standing between two angels. This is modern and it stands where there was formerly a large wooden multi-storeyed belfry which housed the bells and was destroyed during the Revolution.



*The angel of the Resurrection.*



*Men rising from their tombs.*





## THE INSIDE OF THE WEST ROSE WINDOW

The subsidence of the façade at the beginning of the 19th. century shattered the stained glass window depicting the Last Judgment. Only five of the medallions are old: an angel and four men rising up from their tombs.

## THE PORTAL OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

The tympanum and the first two arches were made in workshops in about 1160; the lintel and the three other arches shortly before 1200. The tympanum has an astonishing gradation. In the centre Christ, seated, towers over the scene; he shows his wounds as in the churches along the pilgrimage routes retracing the steps of St. James. Behind Him the angels are carrying the cross, the

nails and the Crown of Thorns. Beneath, and smaller, we can see the Blessed Virgin, hands clasped and wearing shoes. The apostles are barefoot for: «How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the Gospel of Peace».

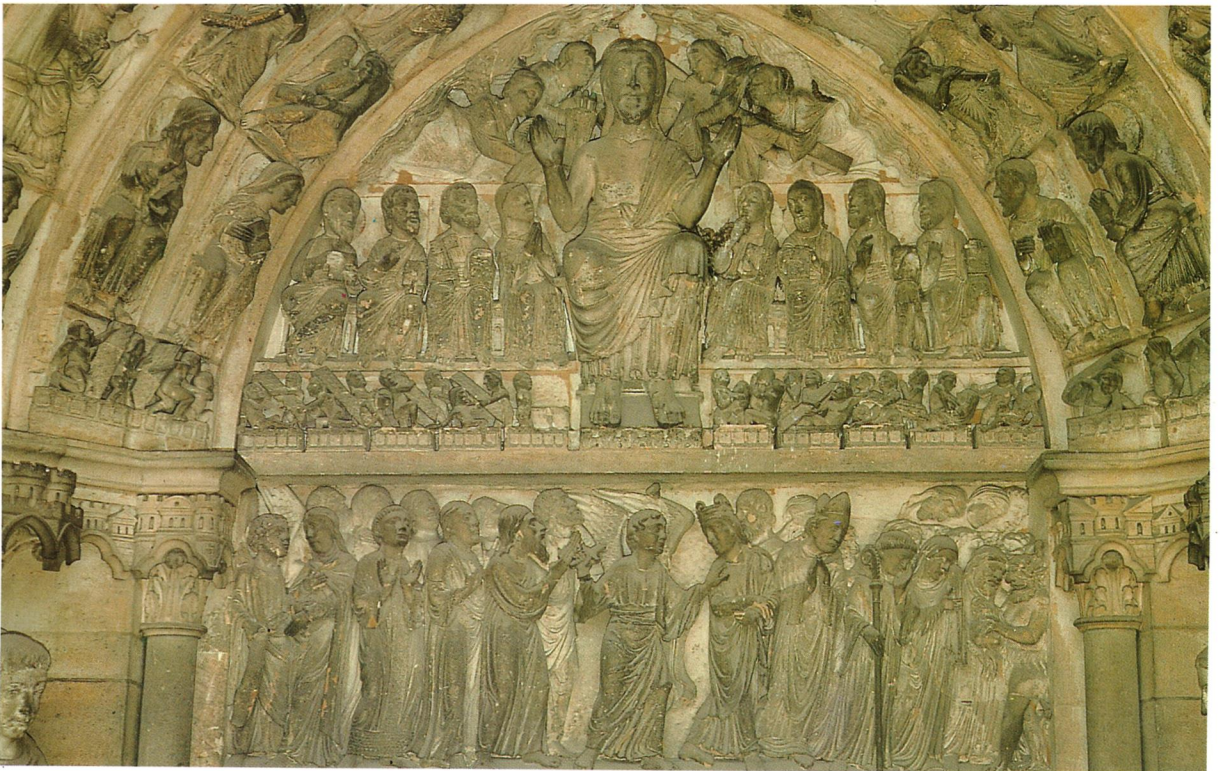
Beneath this the dead rise again at the age of thirty.

On the lintel, St. Michael, his wings outspread, drives off «all these prevaricators doomed to Hell: the King, the bishop the abbot the nun and the miser whose purse strung around his neck, is siezed by the Devil « — as goes the sermon of St. Bernard who often preached here. To the left the angels welcome



*The angels sound the trumpet or carry the souls of little children.*

*Portal of the Last Judgment.*





the elect who are barefoot and dressed only in their shirts all except for a young enraptured monk, for (according to the poet Gauthier de Coincy) «all the rabble go in great haste to Heaven».

In the arches, there are magnificent angels sounding their trumpet or carrying the souls of little children to the bosom of Abraham. An angel is giving out crowns, the blessed are crowned and in the top-most arch we can see Christ calling to the virtuous virgins with their lighted lamps from the open door of the temple, whilst the foolish virgins, their lamps spilled, find the door closed to them.

## THE MIDDLE PORTAL THE CROWNING OF OUR LADY

In this portal only the tympanum and arches are old. The lintel was destroyed in the 17th. century, and the pilasters, like those of the other two portals, were smashed during the Revolution.

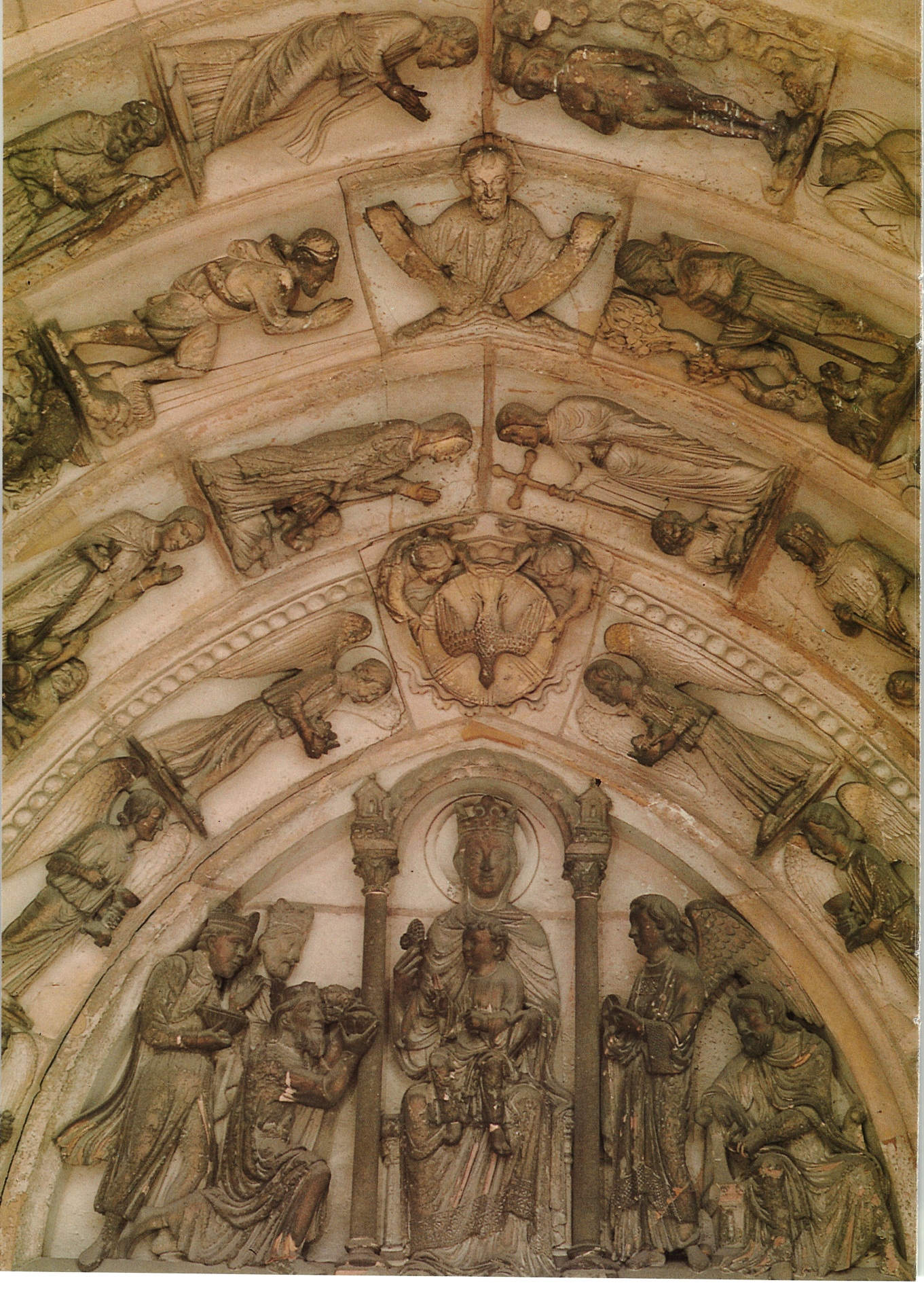
To the left is Our Lady. She is crowned and sitting opposite Her son. They are surrounded by four angels, two standing and holding censers and two gracefully kneeling.

There are four arches. In the first, angels are carrying the Virgin's possessions; in the second and third we have the Tree of Jesse and the prophets who announced the birth of Christ. Jessie, holding the tree is asleep. In the boughs can be seen King David with his harp and Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon. At certain times of the day it is possible to see the remains of paint on these statues.

*Our Lady, crowned and sitting opposite Her son.*









## THE PORTAL OF THE NATIVITY

On the lintel one can see the Annunciation and the shepherds and in the centre Our Lady lying on a bed. Her blanket has beautiful rippling folds. The Infant, despite the ox and the donkey, is not in a crib but is lying on the sacrificial altar with the curtains and the sanctuary lamp.

On the tympanum we have the Three Kings who offer their gifts to the Child Jesus sitting in the lap of his extremely grave mother. There is an angel to the right and Joseph is seated.

This scene refers to a play which was acted out in the cathedral at Christmas. The King, kneeling said: «I give to God, who is Three, three gifts». Jesus is on Mary's knees in the arch, above is the dove of the Holy Spirit and God the Father giving his blessing. The standing angel said: «All that was prophesied has come to pass», and Joseph added: «Many would have wished to see that which we see and have not seen».



## THE ARCHINGS

1/ angels 2/ the fight between vices and virtues, at the top Charity giving her cloak to a pauper.

3/ and 4/ the procession of the prophets, also a Nativity play. Jews and Pagans announcing the Christ. To the left is Virgil writing that a virgin will give birth and above, the blessing of Jacob. To the right,

Abacuc, held by his hair by an angel brings a basket of provisions to Daniel in the lions' den. In the third arch, one of the virtues slays vice with a sword.

King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of the statue of gold with clay feet. This is the only character on the portal whose face has been left untouched by the Revolutionists. Here we have an example of the great skill of Laon's sculptors.

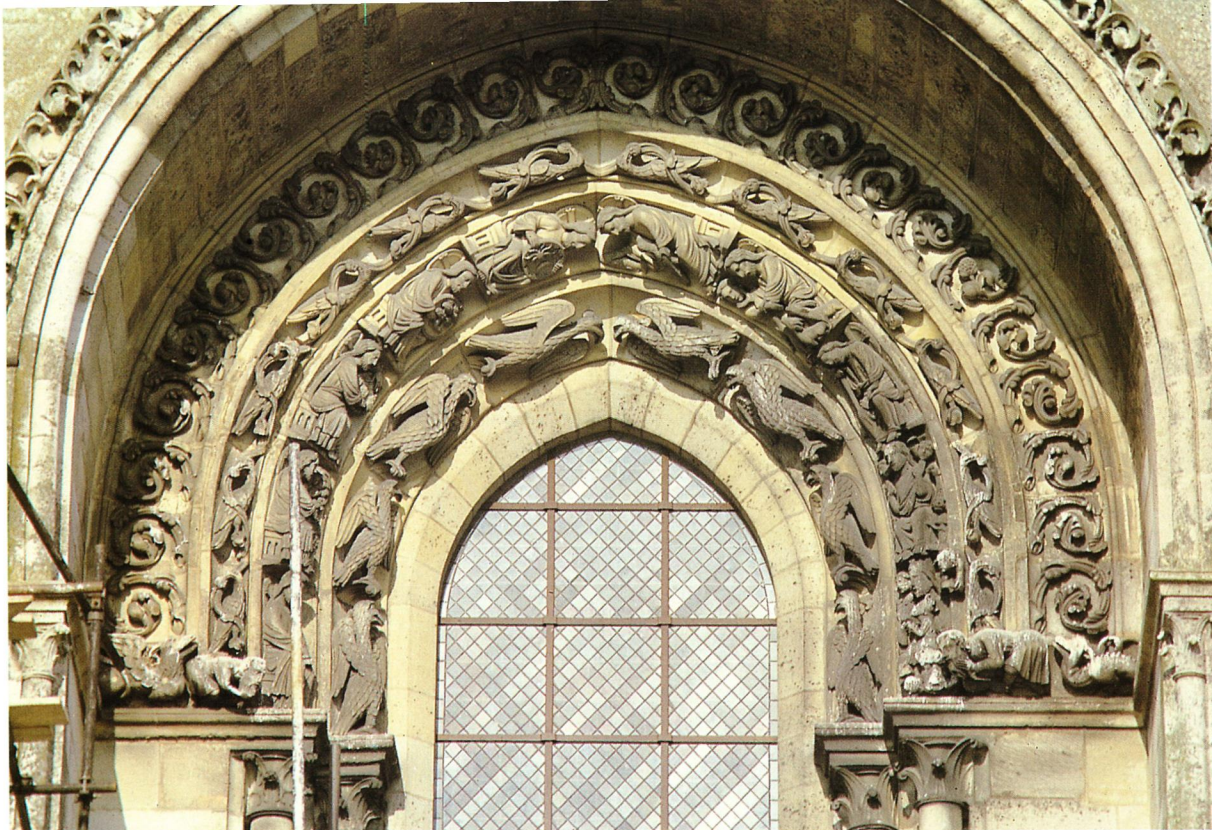
*Charity*



*Nebuchadnezzar*







*South window : The Creation.*

*North window : Philosophy, or the Wisdom of God.*





## THE FIRST STOREY

### South window : the creation

Between two archings in which eagles soar with outspread wings like « The Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters », God, seen as Christ, creates the world : on his fingers he is counting out the days of the Creation.

Light and the nine choirs of angels, the deep earth, the vegetation, the sun the moon and the stars, the fishes and the birds, man and the mammals. Then there is God resting, Man and angel standing before God, Man and Woman and a demon.

On the seventh day God rests. He is seated asleep with His hand resting on His baton....symbol of the architect, the chief mason.

*The seventh day. God resting.*



### North window : the liberal arts

The teaching of the liberal arts held great importance due to the famous College thereof.

The subject is touched upon twice in the iconography of the cathedral : once in the sculptures and once in a stained glass window.

Around two archings entwined with salamanders, we can see Philosophy, or the Wisdom of God. In her right hand she is holding open the Holy Scriptures and in her left, the sceptre (broken), symbol of royalty.

On her breast there is the ladder with : « ten rungs that are the ten towns or stages of the arts : those which lead a man from exile to the

fatherland of Heaven ». Her head is lost in the clouds, for Wisdom : « is Christ Himself who, reduced to the size of a man touches the heavens and is lost from view ».

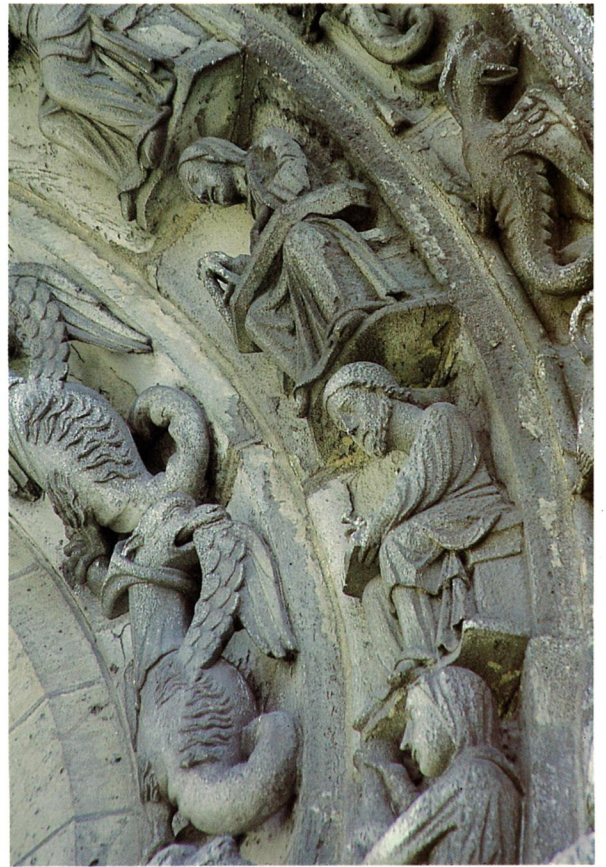
Above Philosophy we have the trivium : grammar, logic and rhetoric and then the quadrivium : arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

Geometry is tracing a figure with a compass. As there is room left in the arching, Architecture and Medicine have been added.

Architecture, the only bearded man amongst the sciences, is drawing up a plan on a board ; perhaps we are meant to see here the chief mason of the cathedral ?

Medicine, a science much studied at Laon holds up a urinal before him.

*Geometry, Architecture and Medicine.*





## THE TOWERS

The towers at Laon are remarkable both by their number (5) and by their lightness. In the 13th. century, the chief architect, the famous Villard de Honnecourt exclaimed in admiration whilst drawing them in his folder : « I have been to many lands, but nowhere have I seen towers like those of Laon ! »

He then went on to explain that from a four sided base, the towers are elevated to an octagonal form and are divided into turrets which are themselves transformed from a square base to become octagonal on the next stage. Inside, the towers are completely hollowed out and the spiral staircases in the turrets rise up in mid-air.

On the West façade the right hand tower was capped by a stone spire with crocketed edges.

This rather beautiful feature was demolished during the Revolution for : « steeples are not in keeping with equality ». However, one of the men working on the demolition fell to his death and by doing so halted the total destruction of the tower.

In the turrets on the façade are to be seen the marvellous stone oxen which watch over the city. Their presence is a homage by the masons and a token of thanks for their exhausting work. Since 1113 during the restoration of the burnt-out Romanesque church, these miraculous oxen who pulled the enormous beams for the roof right up to the foot of the edifice, have been remembered with gratitude.

The North tower is also known as the Thomas-a-Becket tower, named after the English prelate who stopped off at Laon whilst fleeing England in 1163. Bishop Gautier de Mortagne gave him hospitality and presented him at the court of Louis 7th. the younger.

This tower is constructed in the same way as those on the façade but it is taller (60m. compared to 56m.). It thus appears to be more streamlined.

The South tower, or clock tower which is also tall and hollowed out has a particularity. Its turrets are on an octagonal base at each stage.

We know that the towers at Laon served as a model for the towers of the Bamberg church, Germany in 1234 and so we may conclude that the towers were finished by that date.

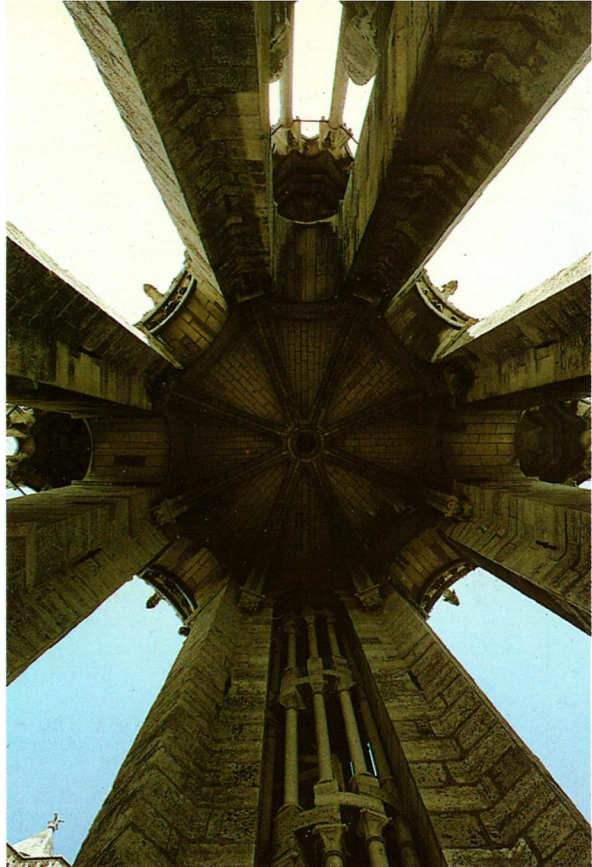


*The Thomas-a-Becket tower.*

*The South tower.*



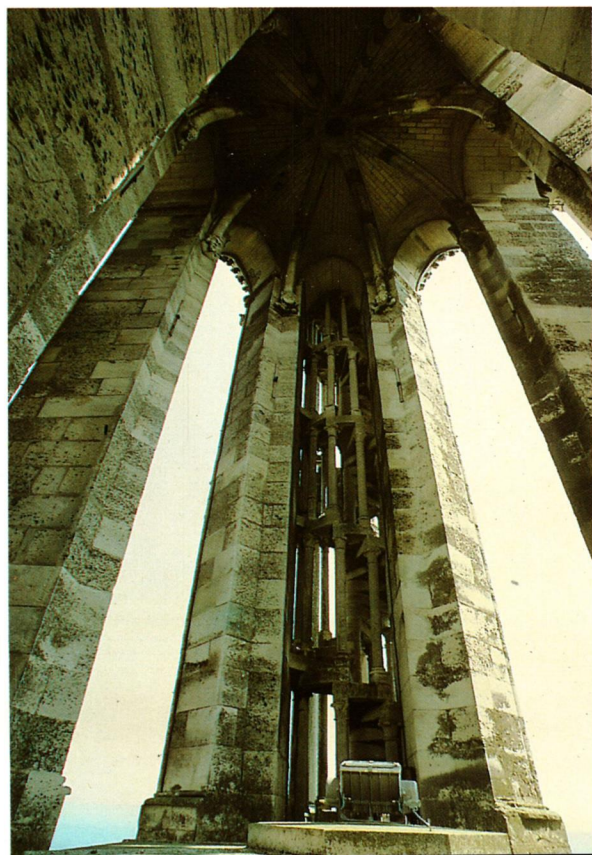




*The hollowed out towers  
with stairways niched in the turrets.*



*The great stone oxen  
which watch over the city.*





## THE FLAT CHEVET

Hardly had the flat chevet been finished when the chief architect (confronted by the problem of the thrust of the arches) had abutment piers added to the buttresses of the side aisles. This was common throughout the Ile de France region and the piers were destined to receive the quarter-circular arches which were resting on the top of the wall under the cornices.

*Perspective view of the flying buttresses on the South side of the chancel.*

*Corbel table with acanthus leaves. At the top of the buttress a little solemn statue sitting facing outwards.*

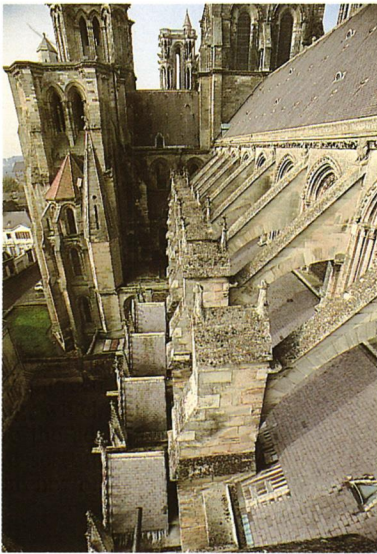
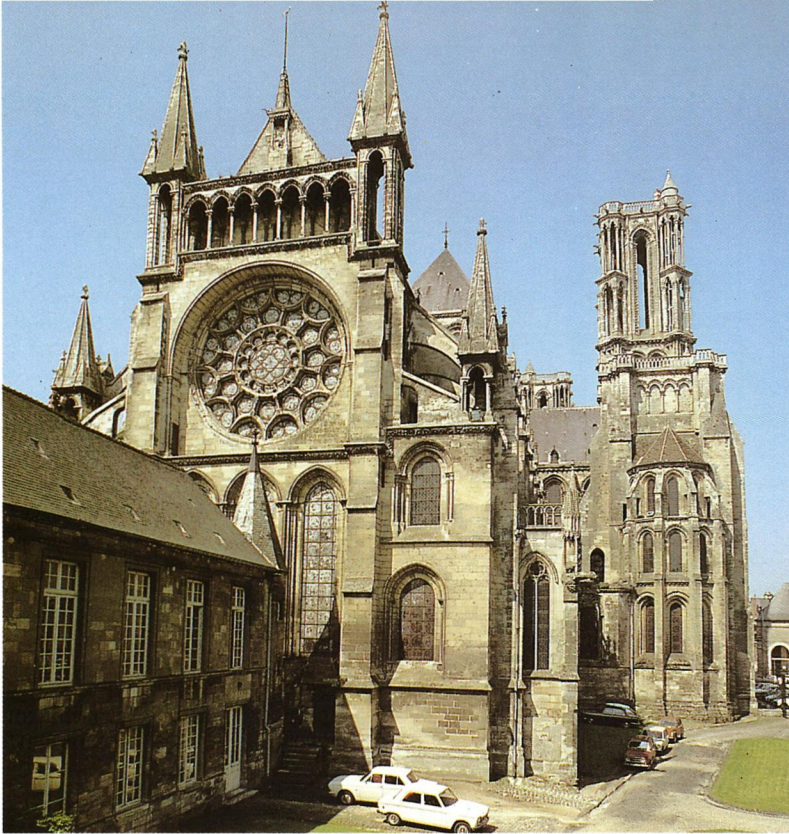
*Further on in the most recent part of the chancel, the corbel table is made of wreaths of foliage and little corbel figures.*

*Corbel figure sitting slightly to the side supporting the edge of the roof with his head and shoulder.*

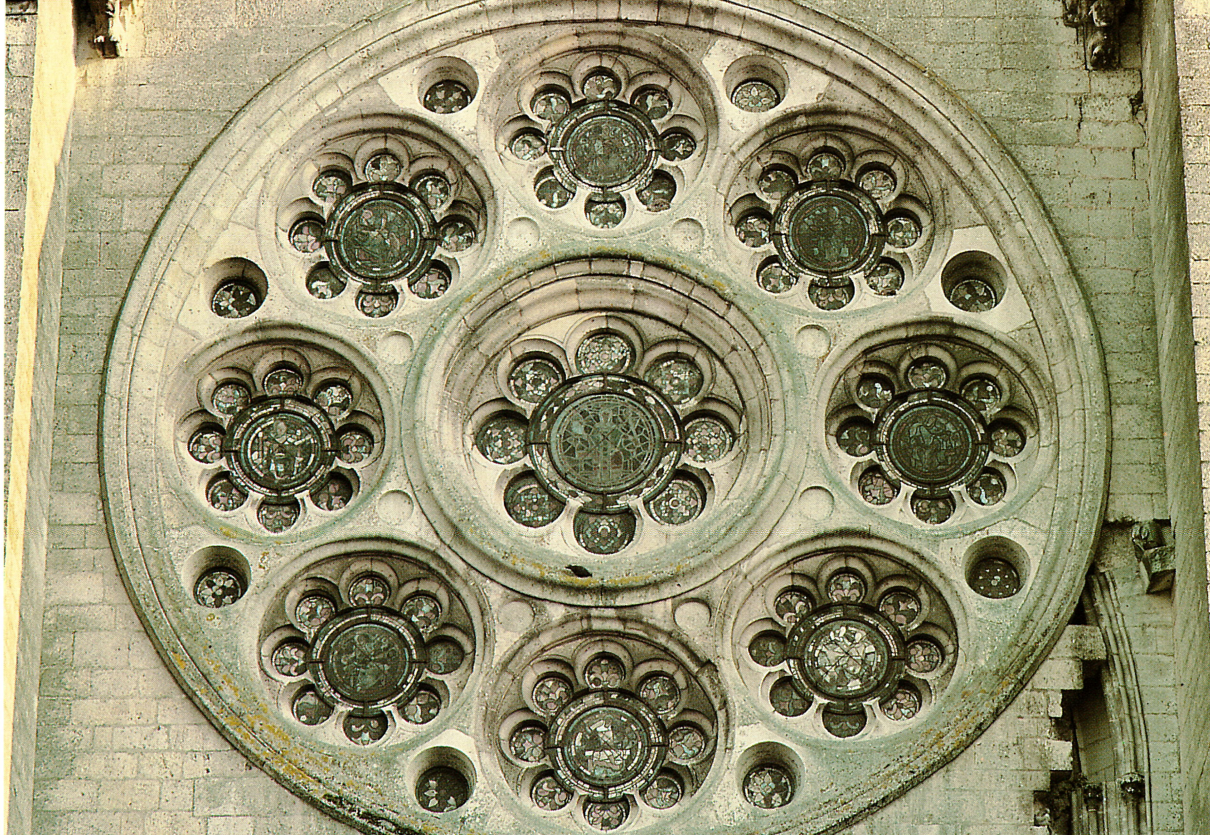
## FLYING BUTTRESSES AND CORBELS

The flat chevet echoes the main interior divisions of the building. Above three big lancets there is a wheel-window similar to the one on the façade, topped by an open-work gallery. Along the sides, two storeys of windows bring light to the side aisles and galleries.

The visitor may also notice above the galleries the rather interesting reminder of a buttress wall pierced with a quarter circle opening, which was a first tentative, before the addition of the flying buttresses, to alleviate the thrust of the arches on the lateral walls.

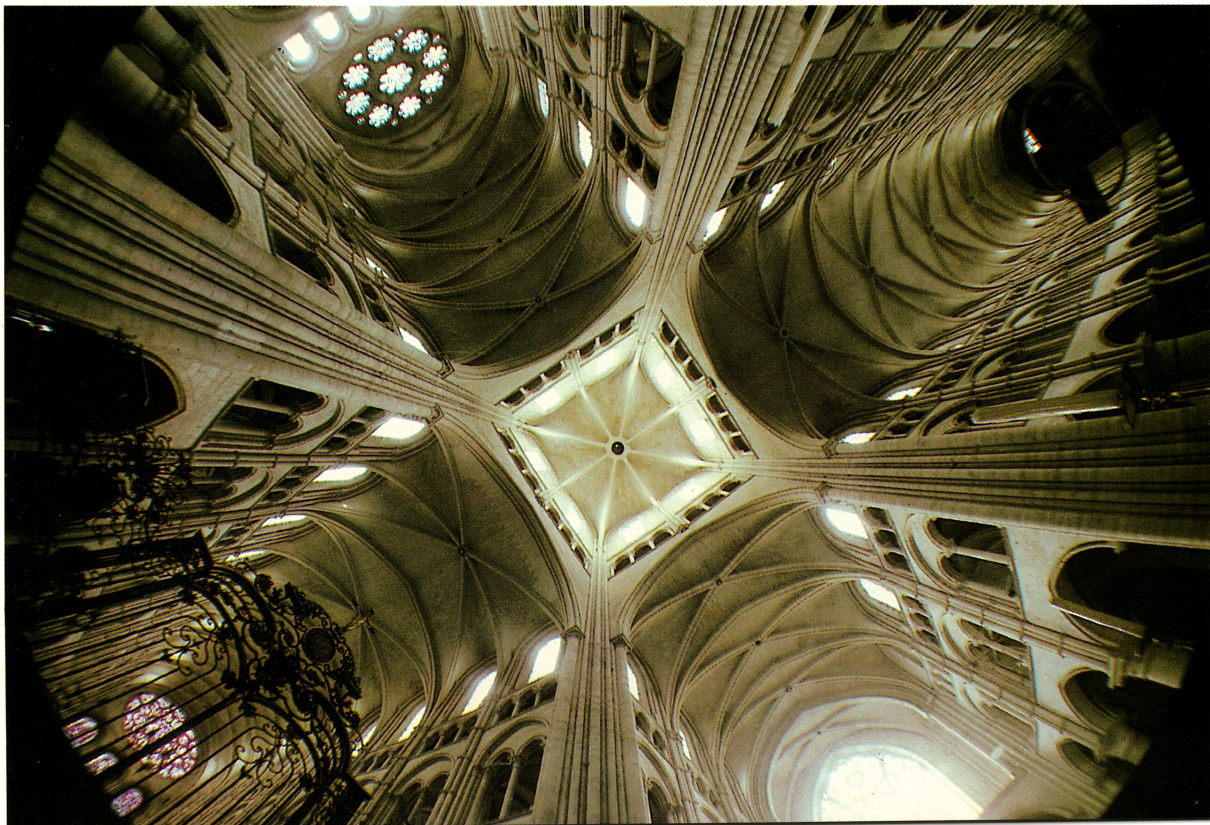




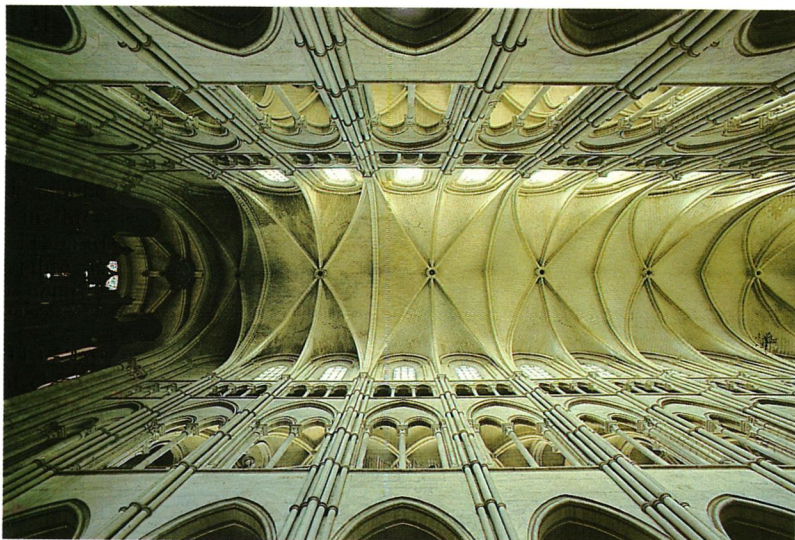


*The North rose window with oculi.*

*The four naves of the cathedral.*







*Roses of the liberal arts : Arithmetic.*



## THE INTERIOR OF THE CATHEDRAL

Despite the fact that work on the cathedral was carried out in three periods stretching from 1155 to 1220, the interior architecture is striking in its unity, balance, clarity and harmony.

The building measures 110.50m. in length and ends in a flat chevet. As in all the early Gothic churches, there are four storeys.

At ground level, great arcades separate the main nave from the side-aisles; above there are large, well-lit galleries, a blind storey (which here at Laon is a real gallery passage running all the way round the upper storeys of the building) and finally clerestories giving lots of light.

The whole church is vaulted: sexpartite vaulting in the chancel and nave and quadripartite vaulting in the transept.

At Noyon and Senlis the fashion for sexpartite vaulting had caused the architects to maintain the alternation of five then three ribs right down to the base of the great arcades. Consequently a weak base gave rise to a simple column and a strong pier to a rectangular mass. In Laon however, the architects opted for the use of the colonnade and solved the problem of alternation by transferring it to the abaci of the capitals.

These are of different degrees of prominence and spread the load of the ribbing leading down from the vault across the wall.

Thus the architects showed a preference for horizontal equilibrium rather than vertical. This preference was already to be seen in the chancels of St. Remi at Reims and Our Lady of Chalons sur Marne.

This horizontal effect is obtained by running a stone cordon all along the wall thus separating the storeys... the great arcades from the galleries, the blind storey and the clerestories.

This stone cordon runs across all the supports, thus «collaring» all the groups of ribbing running down from the vault.





*Heads in the lantern tower.*



*The lantern-tower.*

*Keystone showing strawberry foliage.*

*Vaulting in the Thomas-a-Becket chapel.*







*In the centre of the chevet's rose : the Blessed Virgin.*



## THE TRANSEPT

When he first visits the cathedral the visitor is struck by the vast proportions of the transept. This measures 54m. by 22m. and is surrounded on all sides by huge side aisles which stretch down into the chancel and the nave. It is rather as if there were a second church contained within the centre of the building.

The elevation is quadripartite. The end of each transept arm is finished by a powerful mass of façade which is hollowed out from the inside and spills over into the breadth of the main nave.

All this ensemble is beautiful lit ; as well as the many windows on all storeys, the rose in the North arm of the transept and the huge South stained glass window, there is also a magnificent lantern-tower which, with its eight large bays, allows the sun to penetrate down into the centre of the church at all times of the day.

There are huge twin doors which give access to the North and South parvis. Everything was designed to deal with the never-ending stream of pilgrims who made their way here during the religious festivals. The poet Gautier de Coincy is known to have exclaimed : « Everyone is as squashed as a raindrop and there is so much noise that many think they hear thunder ». The Gothic cathedral has conserved the plans of the Romanesque church which was already an important pilgrimage stage in the steps of St.Martin of Tours, St.Martial of Limoges and St.James of Compostelle.

In its upper levels the transept is equally breathtaking by the view one has across the galleries, by the luminosity and by the large arches at the end of the transept arms which reach into the five-sided apses of the two-storeyed chapels.

It was custom in the Carolingian period and indeed well into the 13th. century to erect an altar to Our Holy Saviour in the first storey of the West façade. An altar to St.John the Baptist which was in the Romanesque church can now be seen in the first storey of the South transept. An altar to St.Thomas-a-Becket was placed in the North transept chapel in 1173, immediately after his canonization.



## THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OF THE FLAT CHEVET

The curved part of the chancel was demolished in 1205 and was replaced by a flat chevet. This was a unique feature for a large French cathedral in the early years of the 13th. century and no doubt drew its inspiration from the flat chevets of the cistercian abbeys in the Laon region.

This huge wall was pierced by three lancets with a wheel window above them and was embellished by beautiful stained glass set in around 1220.

The visitor is absolutely dazzled by the richness of the colours which shine, sparkle and glow at all hours of the day.

The iconography is rich; the artists in stained glass belonged to the ancient school of Soissons, Reims, St. Quentin and Laon which was characterized by the elegance of folds, the beauty of the faces, realism of forms, as well as a sense of perspective in the crowd scenes.

The local artists also seem to have had a deep understanding of the themes of byzantine iconography. (St. John lying across the knees of Christ at the Last Supper; Anne, very aged, holding two candles at the Presentation in the temple; a midwife testing the bath water at the Nativity).

## GREAT ROSE

Whereas the West rose shows the Judgment Day, the rose window of the chevet shows the Church after the Apocalypse.

In the centre of a clover-tracery, the Blessed Virgin sits majestically draped in a red cloak; she is holding the child Jesus on her right knee and is surrounded by two angels. She is Theotokos. At the top we have the prophet Isaiah; on the left, John the Baptist and his lamb.

In the twelve medallions around the Virgin we can see the twelve disciples seated on a rainbow with a phylactery bearing their names. (In the middle at the bottom we have Bartholomew).

In the twenty-four outer medallions we can see the 24 elders from Revelations falling down in reverence before the Lamb. Seated also on the rainbow are 24 young kings carrying prayer vases and musical instruments: viols, greek harp, irish harp, tambourine, psaltery etc... a very accurate musical ensemble of the 13th. century.

## THE NATIVITY

All the faces of the different characters are striking by their individuality, reality and beauty.

1/ A hooded shepherd who is so taken aback on seeing and hearing the angel that he stops piping.



*A shepherd.*

2/ The midwife of the Nativity scene is preparing the bath; She is pouring hot water from a jug and is testing the bathwater with her other hand.

3/ The Blessed Virgin watches rather solemnly as the Three Kings come to pay homage. Her heavy gold crown is outlined against a large red halo.

4/ The very expressive faces of the Three Kings on horseback as they leave by another route.

5/ The round faced angel spreading his wings and shaking a set of golden bells.



*The midwife.*

*The Three Kings.*







*Christ in the tomb.*

*The stoning of St. Stephen with Saul and the Jews.*





## THE EASTER STAINED GLASS WINDOW

Here the Easter cycle is complete from Christ's entry into Jerusalem to His Ascension. We have the Last Supper, the washing of the feet, the Mount of Olives, Judas's kiss, Caiaphas, the scourging, the bearing of the cross, the crucifixion, the laying of Jesus in His tomb, the holy women, Simon-Peter and John, the pilgrims from Emmaus, the Ascension.

A few details from the washing of the feet: to the right the twelve disciples take their shoes off; Simon-Peter, who is seated, places his naked foot over the basin; he is holding his head... «also my hands and my head». Christ leans towards Simon-Peter; behind Him a young man is holding out towels. He is St. Martial of Limoges who, as a young man, is said to have supplied the towels before coming to preach the gospel in the wake of St. James. Note the Saviour's head outlined against a red and green halo.

Christ on the cross, which is green, symbolizing the Tree of Life. His face is brown and His eyes shut and His mother is standing near Him in striking contrast with her white face.

The burial. Christ's followers stand around His body in the tomb. Photography alone enables us to appreciate the beauty of Christ's face here. Here we have the 13th. century stained glass artist at his very best.

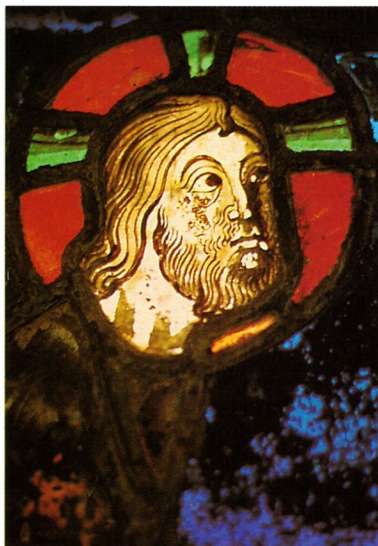
## THE STAINED GLASS WINDOW OF ST. STEPHEN

Six medallions show the life of St. Stephen, a proto-martyr much worshipped at Laon. His life-story used to be acted out on the 26th. December at the roodscreen, half in Old French, half in Latin and told the story of his martyrdom. «Come hear of the agony of St. Stephen and by what injustice he was stoned to death!» Stephen, having been made a deacon is arrested, put on trial, imprisoned and stoned to death. His death scene in the two medallions is remarkable. On the right, Stephen,



*The washing of the feet.*

*Christ (detail).*



*Christ on the cross with His mother.*



*The death of St. Stephen.*





kneeling, clasps his hands. His face is bloody and a large stone strikes him on the neck.

On the left, Saul as a young man, is sitting under a yellow tree. He is watching the mounted guard and the assembled Jews. The staggering of the faces, giving a completely modern perspective, is remarkable.

## THE STAINED GLASS WINDOW OF THEOPHILUS

The story of this confessor who had sold his soul to the Devil and who was redeemed by the Blessed Virgin is the most famous miracle of the Middle Ages. The poet Gautier de Coincy told this story when the window was put in. Who inspired who is difficult to establish...

The faces are of a rare quality.

On the death of the bishop, Theophilus loses his position of confessor. He is obliged to leave and is furious; his bitter expression betrays his disappointment. The poet has him say: «I am no more than a zero in arithmetic».

Theophilus pays homage to the Devil who has a yellow hairy chest, green face and pink wings. He is kneeling, placing his hands in the Devil's hands, while the magician bears away the signed pact.

Theophilus, having regained his position is seated with great airs in a cathedral and: «does not deign to turn an eye».

Theophilus, sorrowful despite all his riches orders a church to be built; this is in fact the rebuilding of his soul. We can see all the workmen; the chief architect with his plumbline, the stonemason and the labourer putting the stones in place.

Our Lady, who has taken pity on Theophilus, goes to retrieve the pact from Hell. The Devil, who has not yet had time to go in, is standing at the door.

Our Lady siezes the pact in her left hand and with her right hand butts the Devil in the stomach with her staff. «Now I'll squash your belly,» she says.

An angel in a white shirt and red cloak comes dancing behind his mistress.



*Theophilus in rage.*

*Our Lady snatching away the pact.*







*Theophilus orders a church to be built.*





*The 12th. century fonts in the transept, made of Tournai shale.*

*The nave and chancel chapels, closed off by beautiful Renaissance screens.*







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